

Urban Informalities: Reflections on the Formal and Informal. Colin McFarlane and Michael Waibel (eds.). Ashgate, 2012, 216 pages, ISBN: 978-1-4094-4132-8. £60.00 (hardback)

As the plural form in its title suggests, *Urban Informalities* explores and analyses a variety of informal processes, such as squatting, self-provision in housing, and street vending. The cases presented in vary in terms of topic, geographical focus and theoretical depth. Editors Colin McFarlane and Michael Waibel outline in the introduction two guiding ideas for the chapters that follow. The first is that informality and informality should not be understood as a dichotomy, but as two interrelated systems. The second idea is presented as the editors retrace the academic debate on informality. Informality was at first understood as the domain of such settlements as slums or favelas. The term has also been used to indicate a “spontaneous, tacit, and affective” way of organising space. A third conceptualisation understands informality as a “government tool”, that is, as a rhetoric device adopted by governments which seek to legitimize “formalising” interventions such as slum clearances or renewals. These three understandings of informality are dismissed. A fourth and more recent approach, which is endorsed by the editors, defines informality as the condition of uncertainty which arises when states enforce the law in an irregular or arbitrary fashion (Roy and AlSayyad 2004:5).

This understanding is most clearly visible in Markus Keck’s account of food merchants in Dhaka, Bangladesh. The article explores the condition of relatively wealthy food wholesalers who operate widely uncontrolled by state and city officials, but are vexed by unexpected demolitions and clearances at irregular intervals. Here, a class of rent-seeking intermediaries lease out vending and storage lots to wholesalers, thus subjecting vendors both to their exploitative impositions and to the state’s irregular enforcement of a (continuously shifting) legal framework.

Sandra Kurfürst adopts a similar approach in her chapter on street vendors in Hanoi, Vietnam. Although street vending had long been an integral part of Vietnamese lifestyle, the establishment of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in 1976 banned street vending as an “ideological deviation from Socialism”. When the government geared Vietnam’s transition to a free market economy one decade later street vending was again stifled, although this time as an “obstacle to

modernisation". The careful historical contextualisation in her chapter supports Kurfürst's claim that, due to a fragmented and confusing regulation of street vending, "the state in Vietnam [is] the main producer of informality".

Neslihan Demirtaş Milz analyses the evolution of informal, self-provided housing (*Gecekondu*) in Ankara, Turkey. *Gecekondu*s were initially ignored by the government, which regarded them as inexpensive solutions to the housing shortage. With the increase of municipal autonomy, *Gecekondu*s were absorbed in the local political life as vote banks. Political loyalty was rewarded with selective – or outright absent – enforcements of the law. Competing political loyalties relied upon, and in turn deepened, ethnic and religious cleavages between Sunnis and Alevis. Upon this evidence, the author warns against a facile (mis)understanding of informality as a favourable condition for the urban poor. The chapter convincingly shows how the condition of uncertainty can be a powerful tool in the hands of patronage-inclined politicians (and of similarly-minded sectarian leaders).

Other contributions go a different way. In his excellent chapter on street hawkers in Old Delhi, India, Ajay Gandhi offers a clear and bold statement that studies on informality in the global south too often assume "state power as monopolistic, citizenship as universal, and vast metropolises as governable through formal authority". His chapter highlights the resilience of the urban poor vis-à-vis state strategies, urban planning and media discourses, and argues that their "presence and agency [...] is much greater than we would otherwise expect". On the other hand, street hawkers' ability to preserve their jobs is shown to rely on the permeability of law enforcement on the local level. Local "big men" mediate with policemen and municipal officers, thus providing a buffer zone between the law-and-order intentions of high bureaucrats and street vendors.

NGO co-directors and academicians Kurt Shaw and Rita de Cácia Oenning da Silva present the story of Detefon, a teenager hip-hop dancer who resisted the allures of gang life in Recife, Brazil, and successfully embarked a career as a professional dancer. In doing so, they adopt Roy's concept of informality as a modality of action, while at the same time reverting her claim that "informality exists at the heart of the state". They do so by showing that supposedly "informal" gangs in the Brazilian favelas rely on highly structured rules and that they take over the state's task of providing the local community with services like access to water and electricity. They also argue that

individuals who live in a condition of constant insecurity may actively use both formal and informal structures for their own welfare, rather than (merely) being oppressed from a capricious or intentionally absent state.

Two theoretical chapters conclude the book. Volker Kreibich proposes “informality by fragility” as a more apt notion to analyse informality in weak states. Assaults and abuses against street vendors or informal settlers “should not be mistaken for law and order actions of strong government, but [...] as manifestations of scarce resources, ill-informed policies and incoherent strategies” (p. 150). The chapter ends with a call to “reconcile informal institutions [...] in such a way that they can complement formal institutions and public authorities”. Incidentally, one may note that this claim can be hardly reconciled with other chapters where informality is understood as an intentional strategy.

Drawing on Douglass North’s theory of institutions, Uwe Altröck closes the volume with an attempt to provide a generalised concept of informality. He illustrates two kinds of informality. He defines *complementary informality* as “informal interactions taking place within formal settings”, and which increases the efficiency of formal institutions. *Supplementary informality*, instead, designates social interactions taking place in contexts which are informally regulated, due to state’s failure to impose formal rules. He then concludes that most forms of interaction between formality and informality are in fact interactions taking place within hybrid arrangements, i.e., within arrangements where both formal and informal practices exist. Although the volume would have certainly benefitted from a more exact definition of informality, Altröck’s contribution does not seem up to the task. His discussion remains largely theoretical, and its sparse illustrations of actual urban processes underscore the difficulty of operationalising his insights, rather than filling this gap.

Urban Informalities will be of interest to anyone willing to learn more about this growing debate, and it provides many informative, articulated and stimulating contributions on the topic. Yet the term is used to describe different things: a mode of action, a strategy of domination, a way of organising social interaction and an act of “othering”. State is also conceptualised differently across the chapters, with some authors interpreting informality as functional to the state and others stressing instances where states are incapable of imposing their will. This conceptual

ambiguity is thus the root of both the richness and the limitations of this book. In its choice between the quest for variety and that for clarity, the volume visibly steers towards the former.

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